

Kids Who Outwit Adults

connecting with adult-wary youth

Larry K. Brendtro, PhD

ReclaimingYouth.org

RAPT 2021

Resource and Adoptive Parent Training
Virtual Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana

© 2021 The Resilience Academy

1



Discovering Strengths

What we want to achieve in our work with young people is to find and strengthen the positive and healthy elements no matter how deeply they are hidden.

We enthusiastically believe in the existence of those elements even in the seemingly worst of our adolescents.

KARL WILKER



Art from Berlin Youth Prison

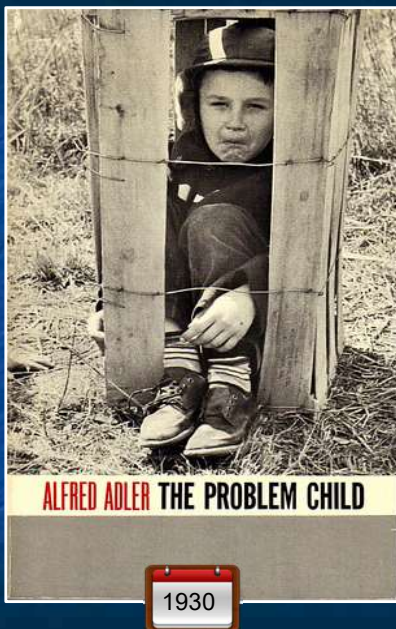


2

My Worst Kid



3

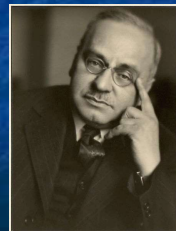


VOICES OF PIONEERS

We shall have great difficulty in treating children brought up in an atmosphere without love.

They will look on us as they look upon all others who hurt them.

ALFRED ADLER



4

WAYWARD YOUTH



August Aichhorn

Foreword by Sigmund Freud



Love is the primary unmet need of wayward youth.

AUGUST AICHHORN

5



August Aichhorn and Anna Freud trained leaders in youth work and education. They mentored Fritz Redl who came to America when Hitler came to power.

6



Fritz Redl established the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp as a therapeutic milieu replacing punishment with relationships. This program trained a generation of leaders in reclaiming youth.

7



LARRY BRENDTRO was on the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp faculty. He brought reclaiming methods to Starr Commonwealth.

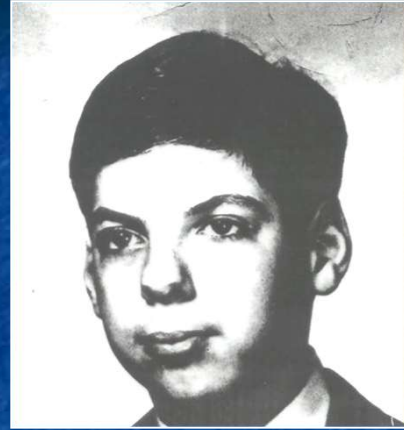
JOHN SEITA was placed at Starr by the Cleveland juvenile court at age 12. John had a thick case file documenting 15 failed placements.

8



"There is no such thing as a bad boy."

FLOYD STARR, 1913



John Seita

Outwitting all adults

9



Dr. John Seita

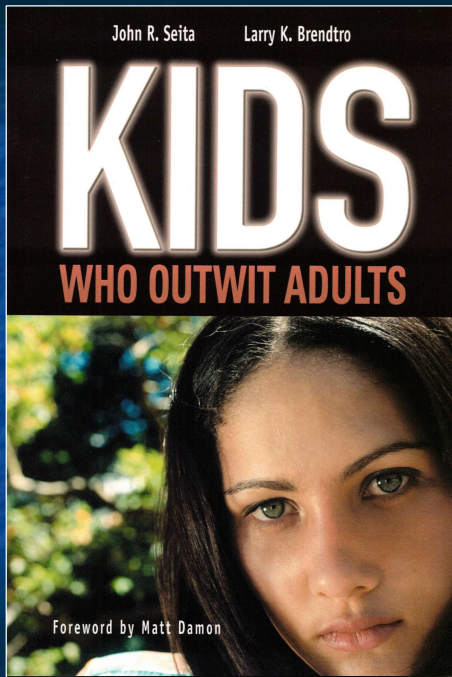
resilience researcher with family



Good Will Hunting

Robin Williams and Matt Damon

10



This book taps the expertise of teens like Will Hunting who outwit adults.



Matt Damon and mother, Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige

11

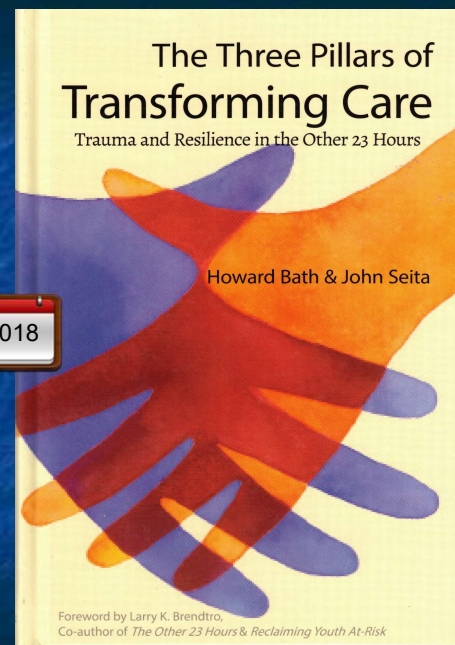
From Trauma to Resilience



HOWARD BATH



JOHN SEITA



12

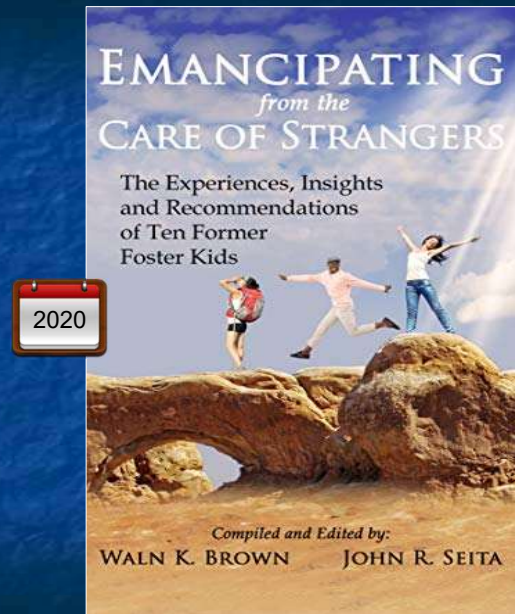
Survivors as Experts



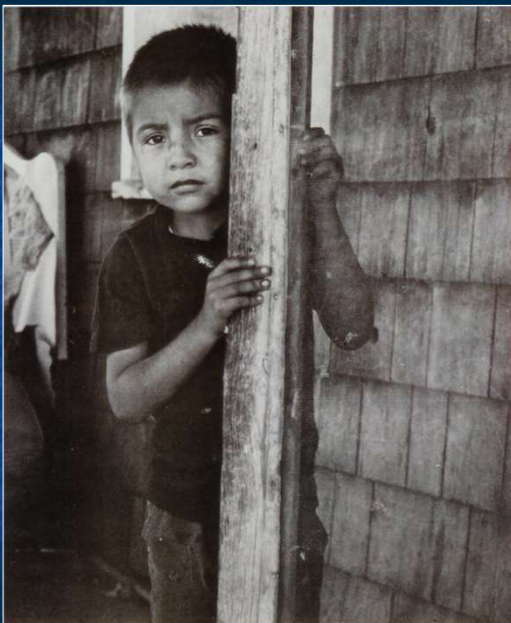
WALN BROWN



JOHN SEITA

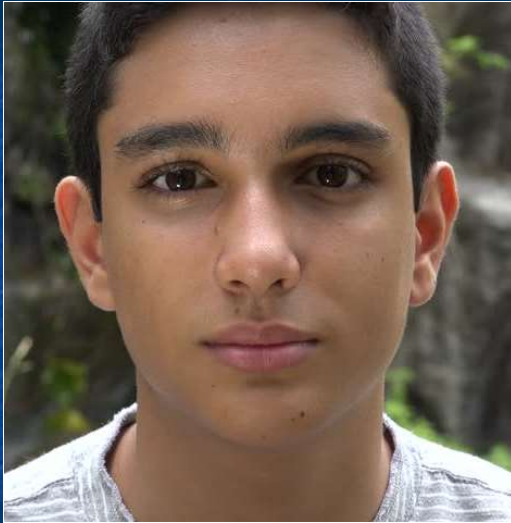


13



Adult-Wary Kids

14



VOICES OF YOUTH

You need to set up a comfort zone. Don't just dive in.

I avoid adults who act superior to us: "Do what I say or else!"

You've gotta let the kids connect with you, not force it.

15

The Social Brain's Two Big Questions



Trust?

Liking?

16



Crisis is an opportunity for connecting.

17



Bids to Connect

What are some bids
young people make?

18

The Science of Trust

JOHN GOTTMAN

Bid to Connect

I am having a really hard day.



+ Turn Towards

Oh! What happened?

o Turn Away

[no response]

- Turn Against

Quit complaining and suck it up!

19

A youth who rejects our bids to connect does not feel safe.



Mentors reach out in respect, even if a youth does not respond.

SCOTT LARSON

20

Distrustful youth are expert at testing and diagnosing adults.

SCOTT LARSON

“You people are fake!”



21



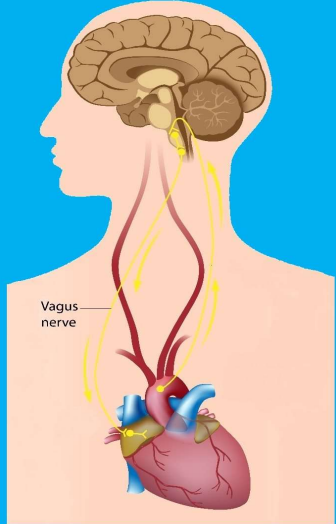
Rapid Trust

The brain makes instant decisions about whom to trust—even with those we have just met. This is the first step to a social bond.

STEVEN FORGES
The Polyvagal Theory

22

The Vagal System Connects Brain & Heart



The Biology of Safety and Danger

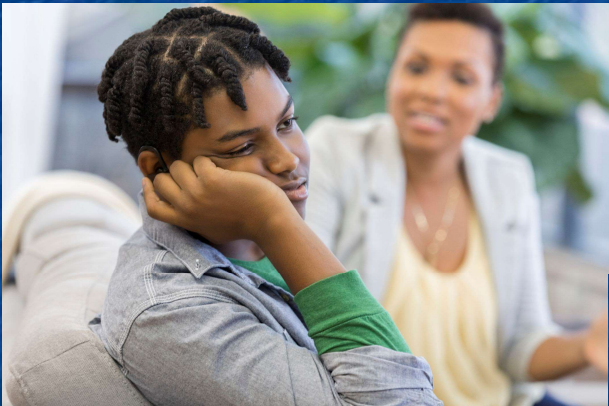
The 10th cranial nerve decodes **voice tone** and **facial expressions** to give us a gut level feeling of whether a person is friend or foe:

- **Signs of danger** → fight, flight, or freeze
- **Signs of safety** → calm, social connection

Trust helps regulate emotions and stress.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK
The Body Keeps Score

23



Tit for Tat

Humans need social bonds, but also to protect themselves from those who pose a threat. Our brains have a simple brain-based rule for cooperation and conflict—**Tit for Tat**:

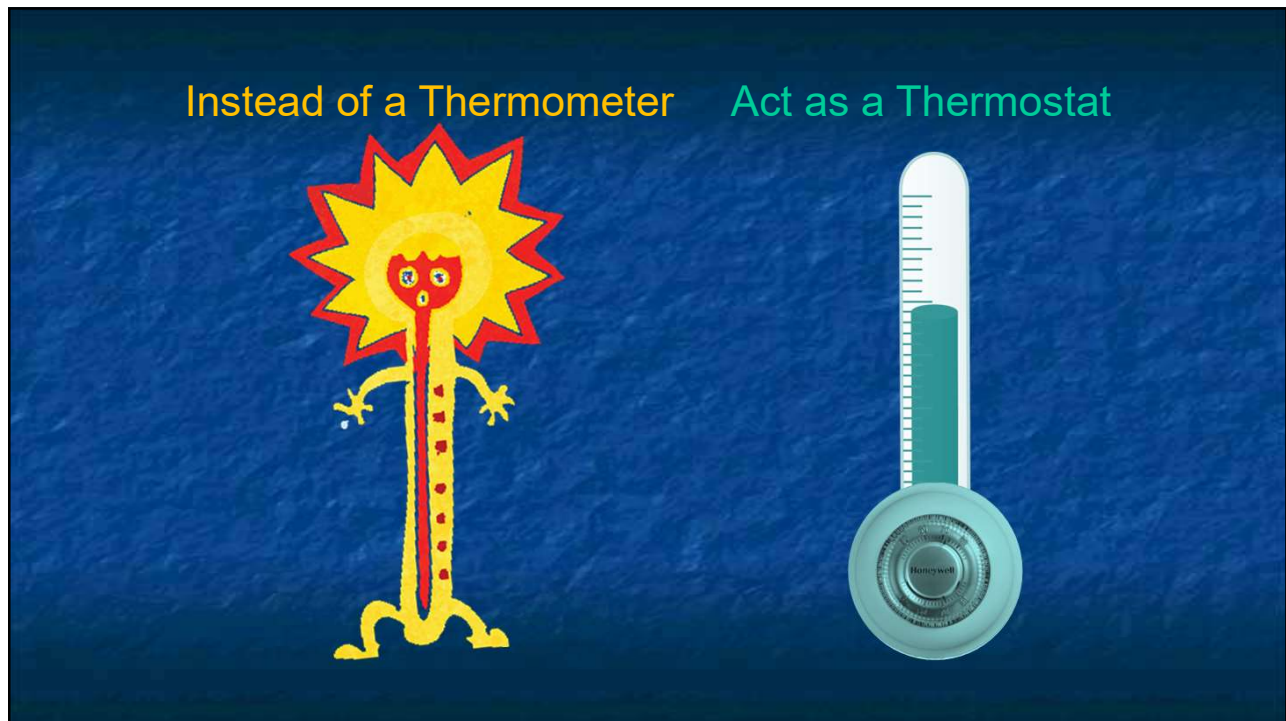
When encountering a person, begin by cooperating, but then mirror back either conflict or cooperation, depending on the person's prior move.

Tit for Tat backfires when our goal is to connect with a distrustful person.

24



25



26

Defensive Coping Strategies



JOHN SEITA
Reaching Disconnected Kids

Emotions: *Amygdala Alert*
Vigilant against attack or rejection.

Thinking: *Distrustful private logic*
Expect hostility from others.

Behavior: *Adaptive distancing*
Keep people at bay for protection.

27

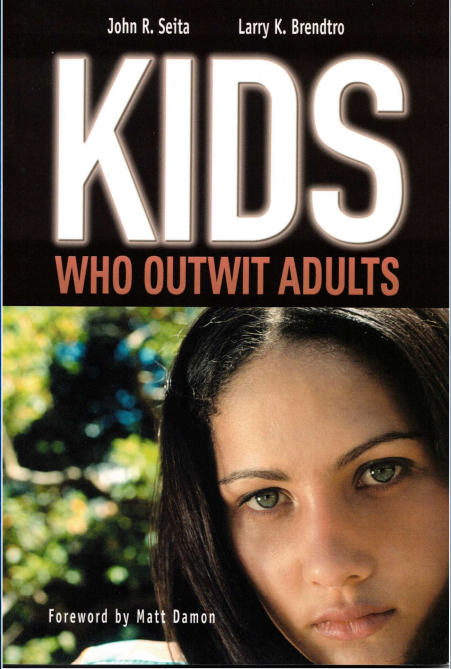


Numbing the Pain

I didn't want no one to love any more. I had been hurt too many times. So I began to learn the art of blocking out all emotions and shut out the rest of the world. The door would open to no one.

RICHARD CARDINAL
Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child

28



John R. Seita Larry K. Brendtro

KIDS

WHO OUTWIT ADULTS

Foreword by Matt Damon

Coping Strategies of Adult-Wary Youth


FIGHT – *Hurt or be hurt.*

FLIGHT – *Hide or be hurt.*

FOOL – *Outsmart the enemy.*

JOHN SEITA

29



FIGHT

Hurt or be hurt

Threaten – *I am dangerous*

Power Play – *I am the boss*

Payback – *You will suffer*

30



FLIGHT

Hide or be hurt

Isolate – *Shut people out*

Retreat – *Shut out the pain*

Escape – *I can't take any more*

31



FOOL

Outsmart the enemy

Deceive – *Charm and disarm*

Diversion – *Act dumb or crazy*

Mind Game – *Insult or provoke*

32



Youth Off The Streets

A teen manages
her case manager.

33

What are typical *reactions* of adults?
What *responses* build bonds of respect?



FIGHT



FLIGHT




FOOL

34

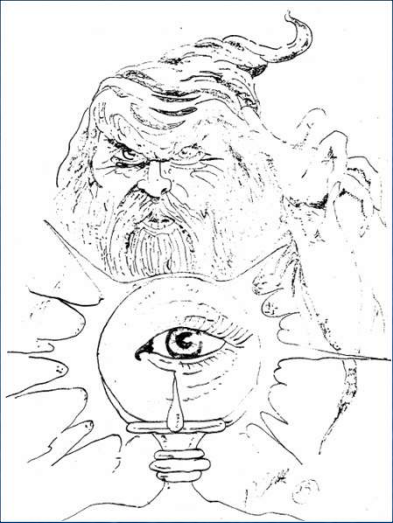
THE OUTSIDE KID

Behavior



Logic Emotions

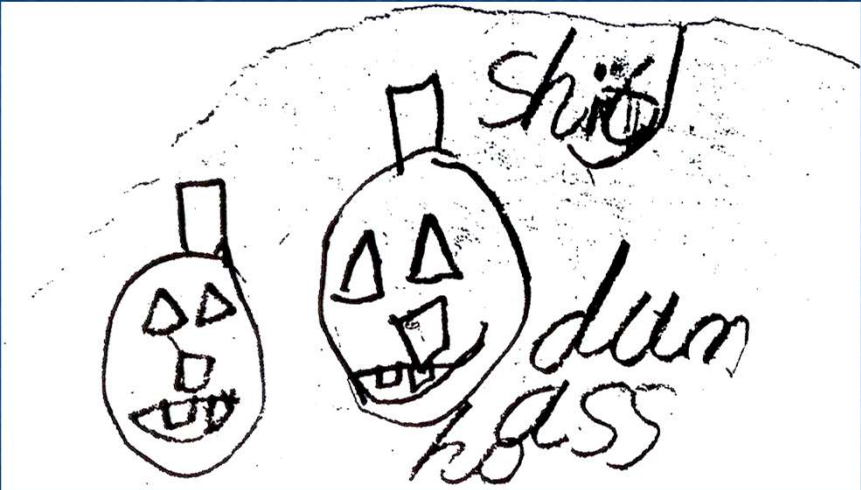
THE INSIDE KID



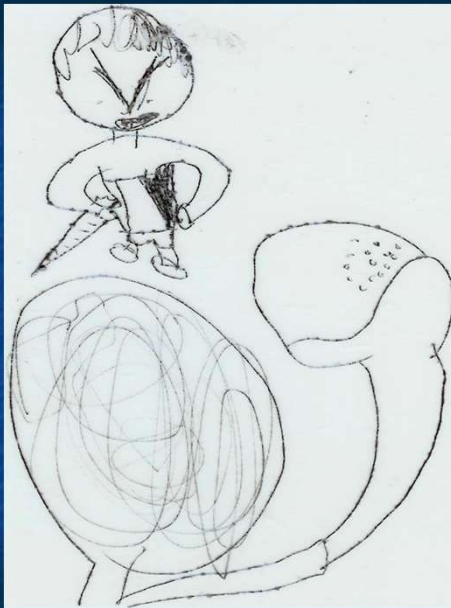
Art is by Paul, an Aboriginal teen in an Australian prison.

35

Second grader Joey's art. How did the school react?



36



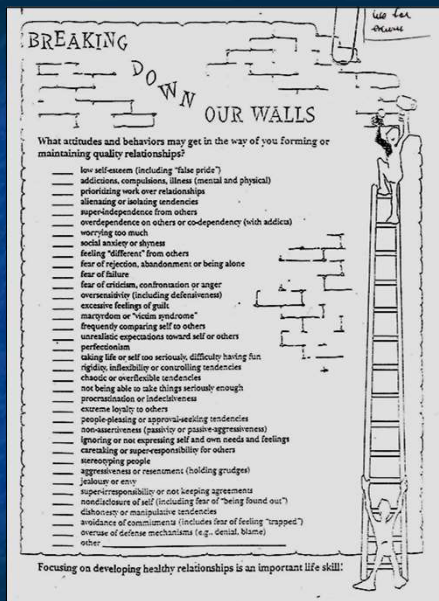
More Art

Even if you are not a diagnostician, you can be a *Suspectitian*.

ELI BOWER

What might one suspect may be troubling this boy?

37



Staff at the psych hospital gave me this list of symptoms of mental disorder they use to observe my behavior.

So, each day I picked a few problems to act out. When they try to mess with my mind, I mess with theirs.

38



New Pathways

If you aren't happy with where you have been, and you are not so sure about where you are going, the only thing to do is to set off in a new direction.

MAYA ANGELOU

39



Strategies for connecting with adult-wary kids?

40





Use problems as learning opportunities.
"Please coach me, don't scold me."

41





Provide fail-safe relationships.
"Don't give up on me."

42





Increase dosages of nurturance.
"I need to know you really care."

43





Don't crowd.
"If you get too close, I will back away."

44



Decode the meaning of behavior.
"I try to hide what I really think."

45



Model respect to the disrespectful.
"Your respect helps build mine."

46



Enlist youth as colleagues.
"I am the only real expert on me."



47



Touch in small ways.
"I am watching you very carefully."



48



Give seeds time to grow.
"I am still learning."

49



Strengthen spiritual roots.
"I need to find a purpose for my life."

50



Adversarial Encounters

Distrust. Youth believes adult won't care, understand, or help.

Antagonism. Youth and adult are in conflict and power struggles.

Alienation. Rancor produces aggression or avoidance.



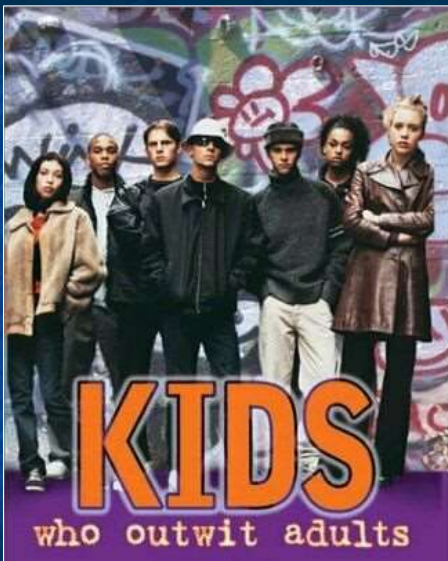
Respectful Alliances

Trust. Youth believes the adult cares, understands, and can help.

Cooperation. Youth and adult work together to solve a problem.

Attachment. Mutual respect develops from working together.

51



Kids Who Outwit Adults

connecting with adult-wary youth

Larry K. Brendtro, PhD

ReclaimingYouth.org

RAPT 2021

Resource and Adoptive Parent Training
Virtual Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana

© 2021 The Resilience Academy

52